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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1624  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2325  
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 1259  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASTANA 002162

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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: NUR OTAN'S LIBERAL DEMOCRAT?

REF: (A) ASTANA 2148

(B) ASTANA 2141

(C) ASTANA 0431

Classified By: Ambassador Richard E. Hoagland: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Yerlan Karin, the secretary of the President's ruling Nur Otan party, is not shy about criticizing the policies of his party and the government. A former think-tanker who came to the government because he became tired of "criticizing from the sidelines," Karin openly assesses the strengths and weaknesses of the Kazakhstani political system. He also freely verbalizes views far more liberal than those usually heard from high-level officials. This cable aims to paint a portrait of one "liberal" in President Nazarbayev's circle. END SUMMARY.

POLITICAL SCIENTIST FIRST...

¶2. (C) The 33-year-old Yerlan Karin came to politics from academia. A graduate of Kazakh State University with a degree in political science, Karin began his career as a researcher and analyst and ran his own think tank, the Central Asian Agency for Strategic Research, from 2000 to 2003. He entered politics in 2003 as the first deputy chairman of the now-defunct Asar party of President Nazarbayev's daughter, Dariga. He then began a two-year stint as an advisor of the Mangistau oblast akim (governor). In 2008, Karin joined the Presidential Administration as the head of the Internal Policy Department. In November 2008, he moved to his current position as one of two party secretaries of the Nur Otan party. Despite his official responsibilities, Karin continues his analytical pursuits -- he told the CDA on December 5 (ref A) that he is finishing a book on the role of security forces in policy formation, with publication expected in January.

... POLITICIAN SECOND

¶3. (C) Karin explained that he moved from academia to politics, because he "got tired of criticizing (government policy) from the side-lines." Karin's think-tanker background easily permeates conversation, especially in his frank and objective assessment of Kazakhstan's political reality. He was surprisingly open in his criticism of both the Nur Otan party -- "It lacks a platform, it tries to be all things to all people" -- and of the government -- "It works in isolation, setting priorities without consultation." At the same time, he sees party politics as the best "school of democracy," asserting, "It teaches you to negotiate, consult, face criticism." He aims to make Nur Otan more responsive to citizens' concerns,

stating, "Policy that does not have public support is useless." Interestingly, Karin puts little stock in the power of the parliament, dismissing the parliamentarians as "talking heads." Although Karin clearly enjoys his work at Nur Otan, he does not plan to stay in politics permanently. He told the CDA he intends to return to political studies "in the near future."

#### LIBERAL ON POLICY

14. (C) In the course of a free-flowing conversation with the CDA, Karin voiced opinions far more liberal than those usually heard from high-level Kazakhstani officials. Karin believes that human-rights defender Yevgeniy Zhovtis was not treated equally under the law when he was sentenced to four-years of imprisonment for vehicular manslaughter (ref B), citing an example of a mid-level government official who received a suspended sentence for a similar crime. He sharply criticized the trial balloon that was floated several months ago, supported by his own party, to make President Nazarbayev President-for-Life. In his view, "the clans [geographic and economic power groups] will hatch clandestine plots, and the opposition will plot a revolution" if the option for a peaceful power-transfer is not available.

15. (C) Karin was equally critical of the disproportionate libel suit that forced opposition newspaper "Taszhargan" to close (ref C). A damage award of one tenge (less than 1 USD) "would have proven the point without making the government look vengeful," he assessed. Karin's views appear guided by a genuine wish that the government's actions be perceived as fair, just, and beyond reproach. "These blunders open us to criticism," he argued. Karin claimed he voices these opinions privately to his colleagues at the Ak Orda (Presidential Administration) and sometimes publicly to the media.

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"Periodically, I get a whack on the head," he joked.

#### STRONG ON NATIONAL IDENTITY

16. (C) Karin, an ethnic Kazakh, has strong feelings on the issue of Kazakh identity and culture. "The identity question is coming to the fore" in Kazakhstan, and Nur Otan is sidestepping this highly-sensitive, but important, question, criticized Karin. Like many Kazakhs, Karin is ambivalent about the President's Doctrine of National Identity, which calls for a development of a "civil" -- rather than ethnic -- Kazakhstani identity. "Kazakhs must feel themselves the building blocks of this nation, the first among equals," he pressed. He presented the CDA with a book on the history of Alash Orda, the autonomous Kazakh government that existed between the collapse of tsarist Russia and the establishment of Soviet Kazakhstan. Among the portraits of Alash Orda members that line the entry way to his office, he readily pointed to the one of Alikhan Bukaykhanov, the leader who "personally negotiated with Lenin on the status of Soviet Kazakhstan." (NOTE: By comparison, the only portrait of President Nazarbayev was a small calendar on Karin's desk. END NOTE.) For Karin, Alash Orda was Kazakhstan's "first experience with democracy." He lamented the lack of knowledge and acknowledgement of this period in Kazakhstan's history.

17. (C) COMMENT: Karin is a true intellectual who exemplifies the "liberal" wing of Kazakhstani political elite, with whom we are actively engaging -- Karin will travel on an International Visitor's program in February. A young, well-educated official, he is honest about the shortcomings of Kazakhstan's political system but nevertheless committed to its improvement. Although surprising at first that someone with such liberal views would be leading the President's Nur Otan party, it shows President Nazarbayev's pragmatic approach to power -- it is easier to work with the keenest young liberal minds than against them. END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND